



OLD FREQUENCY

New wave technology has not knocked 'ham' radio off the air

In the beginning...

Long before television filled living rooms with pictures of gargantuan proportions, long before computers made writing a letter obsolete, and long before cell phones snapped photos and made conversation a thing of the past, wireless radios were literally making waves. A relatively simple invention, the turn-of-the-century wireless radios linked the world in ways unimaginable.

Door County native Clayton Cardy was at the forefront of the wireless rage. "What a thrill it was, that evening in 1920, when I heard my first broadcast radio," recalled Cardy. "It was this magic box with about three large knobs on the back and a goose neck speaker sitting on top."

"Can you imagine the excitement of hearing music coming out of that speaker across the airways? And no wires? It was a wonderful mystery, and I was hooked for the rest of my life. It was so exciting and it still is." A founding member of Door County Amateur Radio Club established in 1923, Cardy and his fellow "hams" continue to promote amateur radio throughout the peninsula.

Cardy explains wireless radio in the early days as "a tuned frequency



receiver where each amplifier stage is tuned separately. In later years, the variable condensers were all tied together so you turned only one knob. The radio operated off 'B' 45-volt batteries. A six-volt battery supplied the power for the filaments. From that point in time, radio developed very rapidly."

Although the origins of amateur radio date back to the late 1880s, the first listing of stations appeared in 1909 and included locations in the United States and Canada. Eighty-nine amateur radio stations were also listed. Promoted in large part by hobbyists, wireless radio also served as emergency and disaster warning systems in cities across the United States.

portion of the Door County Amateur Radio Club. FRONT ROW SEATED, left to right: John Enigh (K9HJL), Ed Seely (WB9ARB) and Ken Meyer (K9KJM). BACK ROW STANDING, left to right: Jon Hollingshead (K9BIO), Roy Holtzman (K9AAW), Roy Sahlstrom (KCBHID) and Jack Ruck (K9MLU).

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A language all its own...

Qualifying as an amateur radio operator was an arduous pursuit and required passion and dedication. Certainly, amateur radio operators are exceptionally articulate and well-versed in technology; licensing certification testing is required and insures a superior level of excellence. Initially, all wireless communication used the International Morse Code and it continued to be used by many operators after the development of "voice radio." Due to the international nature of amateur radio, Morse code proficiency was initially a requirement for all amateur radio licenses and continued to be required for some licenses until 2007.

Often speaking a language all their own, wireless radio operators are referred to as "hams," though the etymology is a bit confusing. Some sources refer to the term "ham-fisted," meaning clumsy or incompetent as in "ham actor." A stronger case might be made for the use of the first letters of radio's pioneering fathers' names: Hertz, Armstrong and Marconi.

What is amateur radio?

The term amateur is used to distinguish this service from commercial or government radio. When the radio wavelengths first began to be regulated in the early 1900s, the amateur or "ham" operators were given the wavelengths shorter than 200 meters. The amateur operators pioneered these "short" wavelengths which are now home for the majority of wireless services from broadcast radio and television to the recent explosion of mobile telephones and internet Wi-Fi.

With the availability of mobile and internet communications to young people, it is understandable that today's youth is not attracted to amateur radio as it was in Cardy's day. One notable exception, however, is the space program. Many astronauts and cosmonauts are licensed amateur operators. Chatting from space with individuals and school groups grounded on earth during off work breaks, they communicate using the ham wavelengths.

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amateur radio facts

Every amateur operator is assigned an identifying name, a combination of letters and numbers. In the United States, all radio stations begin with W, K, or N. Amateur licenses include numbers that indicate the specific area of the country. Wisconsin in the 9th call district, as is evident in Clayton's call: W9OVO.

There are no age restrictions on becoming a licensed amateur radio operator. There are six classes or levels of licensing which is called a "ticket."

During World War II all United States amateur radio operators were prohibited from communicating elsewhere. Licensees were fingerprinted, photographed, and required to show proof of citizenship to the FCC.

Amateur radio operators often take part in nets—short for networks—scheduled on-air meetings.

Famous "hams" include: Walter Cronkite, Ronnie Milsap, Garry Shandling, Andy Devine, John Huston, Priscilla Presley, Herbert Hoover Jr., and Donnie Osmond.

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Vitally important today, is the continued use of amateur radio as a means of communication when disasters strike. Amateur operators communicate daily, both locally and world-wide, and are often called upon to use their personal equipment to fill in when other services fail.

Wireless radio in Door County...

In Door County, the interest in wireless radio reflected the universal interest in the new system of communication. The first official amateur radio operators' club was organized by Sturgeon Bay High School students. According to the local newspaper, the Door County News, 19 radio amateurs and fans met for the first time on January 19, 1923.

"I really didn't know anything about amateur radio at the time," Cardy admitted. "But the radio stores were growing big time and I would listen to broadcasts there. Eventually a friend



Founding member of DCAMC, Clayton Cardy (W9OV) with radio equipment in early 1990's. At age 95 Cardy remains active on the airwaves.
Photo by John Enigl

gave me some old radio parts and I built my own BC set. Necessity and economics was the mother of invention," Cardy laughed. And what the high-school student didn't know he quickly learned.

Marking its 60th anniversary, the Door County Amateur Radio Club continues the tradition of participating in wireless communication with a membership of approximately 40 men and women. "It's an equal opportunity activity, a common denominator," Cardy said. "We come from every type of job, and we live all over the world. It's a great way to make friends anywhere."

The future of amateur radio...

Challenged by modern technology, amateur radio has lost much of its allure. "It's not as exciting today as it was when I was young," recalled Cardy. "Everything today is so fast, so instant. Everything is digital. In the early years of amateur radio, we thought it was a big deal to talk to someone in a foreign country. But now there are so many other ways to communicate that ham operators are becoming fewer and fewer.

"I want to believe ham radio will continue. It was so much fun and I want to pass that enjoyment on. The stories of the people I talked to through ham radio are unbelievable. King Hussein of Jordan, Chet Atkins, Barry Goldwater ... that would never have happened without ham radio," smiled Cardy. "It's been a ball."

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